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ABSTRACT

Students' understandings of the concept of social class before and after taking the Social Science Foundation course (D101) at Great Britain's Open University were investigated in 1980. Among the students' conceptions before the course was that people are middle class or working class according to their job. Other conceptions were that social class is connected with the amount of money earned, how much education or training is required for one's job, personal characteristics (e.g., intelligence and appearance), one's background or upbringing, attitudes toward life and values, and the value that society places on one's job. Most students described one or two sorts of conceptions and talked about things they saw as associated with class rather than describing the construct of social class. The second interview after the course elicited the same conceptions, except that no mention was made of the value of the job to society or the characteristics of the person. Additionally, after the course, reference was made to class as a historical classification or myth, as a measure of social mobility, and as a power position in society. Over all, half of the students gained a better understanding of the concept of social class, while the remainder appeared not to have changed their understandings. It is suggested that the course specifically focus on the concept of social class, and that students' initial understanding of the concept should be determined. (SW)

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STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Students studying the Social Science Foundation Course were interviewed at the beginning and end of the course about their understanding of key social science concepts taught in the course. This paper describes students' initial understandings of the concept of social class and how these have changed as a result of studying the course. The key issues in understanding the quality of students' learning outcomes are also discussed.

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The Study Methods Group is formally recognised as a Research Group in the Institute of Educational Technology. The overall aim of the group's work is to understand how students approach studying with the University's distance learning materials and why they adopt particular approaches. This understanding is contributing to the development of a sounder theoretical basis for improving student learning.

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STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CLASS

Background

This report deals with a study of students' understandings of the concept of Social Class before and after they studied D101, the Social Science Foundation Course.

In 1980 the Study Methods Group interviewed 29 students three times over their first year of study with the Open University in order to find out about their orientation to study, the approaches they took to studying and the outcomes of learning. The background to the work is described in Morgan, Gibbs and Taylor, (1980).

With the course team, we identified a set of questions to investigate students' understandings of key concepts taught in the course. Students were asked these questions before and after the course in individual interviews.

One of these questions was: "We say that a train driver is working class while a teacher is middle class - Why?" This question was intended to explore the students' understanding of the concept of social class and how their ideas changed and improved after their study of D101. For a fuller description of the methodology and a report of other questions we asked see Taylor, Gibbs, and Morgan (1981).

Introduction

Social Class is a fundamental and important concept in social science and comes up in many parts of the social science foundation course. In particular the parts of the course we used to explore the students' approach to study were the blocks on 'Production and Allocation' and 'Work' which discuss the industrial revolution, the modern economy, capitalism, work and power, and the growth of the Trade Unions. Social class is an idea which is central to these themes and also is used

in other blocks in the course such as 'Attitudes and Beliefs', 'Social Relations', and 'Power'. In fact, although there is no one section dealing specifically with social class it is a theme which recurs throughout the course.

We might expect therefore that students would have a reasonable understanding of Social Class at the end of the course. But first let us look at their initial understandings: from the first interview before the students started the course we identified a number of distinct conceptions of social class that they held. We will describe each conception with the aid of quotations from the interviews.

STUDENTS' INITIAL UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL CLASS

Social class is to do with the nature of the job

Here the students' idea is that people are middle class or working class according to the job they do. If your job is clean, clerical, 9 to 5, then you are middle class, but if it is dirty, manual, shift work then you are working class. Here your class position relates entirely to your position in your job.

"....you must be classified according to what you do, not according to where you came from - yes, it must be the difference between working with your hands and working with your brain."

"It's associated with his clothing when he worked - in other words you think of a train driver with a dirty job whereas a teacher does nothing but go to work in a decent suit --- but I think you associate working class with a dirty job and terrible hours. The teacher has a soft job particularly the holidays - and the pension scheme - the working class never had a pension scheme or any stability of job."

"Because I suppose the teacher is looked on as a profession and -- I suppose it's - you associate middle class jobs with where people use their brains more than their hands. I suppose a train driver has to use his brain as well but it's classed as a manual job I suppose. A teacher has a cleaner job, that's associated with it as well".

"I sort of understand it that - eh anybody that sort of works with their hands or -- that sort of job is considered to be working class and anybody in the sort of professional work is middle class."

Social class is to do with money

Here social class is seen to be to do with the amount of money you earn (but not how you earn it). However, many students were confused by the fact that train drivers probably earned more than teachers and so they were, in a sense, thinking aloud about a problem within their conception.

"You've got people who've got a lot of money and people who haven't got a lot of money - but I don't really think there's many working classes. There's them with the money and everybody else. But there's no middle class there's only an upper class. There's only the rich and the not so rich."

"Eh - at one time it would be based in wage and salary because before the war teachers were earning a high - they were highly paid members of society - but today the train driver will earn a lot more - so today it's not wage or salary anymore - huh - difficult."

"I suppose teachers do well because they enjoy a higher salary for working less hours. I mean I know a lot of teachers are badly paid but they don't have to work quite such long hours for their money really. Probably the train driver would get a lot more money but he'll have to work a lot of overtime."

Social class is to do with education or training

Here social class is to do with how much education you have or how qualified you need to be to get the job.

"Oh well you only need practical skills to be a train driver and you need a degree and a college diploma to teach."

"A train driver perhaps wouldn't need as much training as a teacher, a teacher's more academic."

"I suppose it depends on the level of education you have to get into that job."

"It's from the status he's achieved at school. Whereas a teacher might go on to university, college or university and come out to a nine to five job. A train driver he stops - at secondary school perhaps or even junior school and takes up train driving straight from school."

"Well one of the things is that the teacher has gone to college and got a training -- I mean I realise that the train driver would have to be trained to do the job but he wouldn't need to have the same sort of qualification."

"A teacher - you've got to go to college and that sort of thing and it puts you up a bit even though they don't earn that much money so I don't know why you know. That's the way it seems you know whatever sort of job you've got, if you've done a couple of years at college than you're a bit higher up the ladder. I don't know someone - like me with nothing then you're way down, you know. You get someone with a qualification they start at the same factory with someone who hasn't got qualifications and they are both sort of lower class you know but this guy is made foreman because he's got qualifications and he's immediately middle class."

Social Class is to do with the characteristics of the person

Here the term social class is identified with individuals who belong to a particular class because of their personal characteristics noteably intelligence and appearance. This is not so much due to background as to the individual.

"It's a spin over from the past where teachers were thought to be social superiors - which I think they are really because they generally are more intelligent people for one and more dedicated to their job."

"Also a teacher will be likely to have a better speaking voice, better diction, probably a better dress sense but that doesn't apply so much now. But that's what middle class means."

"In your mind you have an image of a train driver with his sandwich box and his cloth cap sort of image - it's the thing that you think of and I suppose it just means that they are defined sort of worlds somehow."

"Obviously I would think yer middle class cos you're dressed properly a white collar worker and go around in a suit and nicely dressed and you got to live in that type of area you know."

"The teacher he's got a more developed brain than the train driver he's been selected so that's why he's called middle class."

Social Classes to do with the background or upbringing of the person

Here social class is identified more with the family than the individual. So that rather than the job dictating the class the class dictates the job. Moreover the class you are in depends on the class of your parents and the way they brought you up, and the kind of sub-culture you are in.

"I suppose the train driver is likely to come from a family where the family has done manual work and perhaps for one reason or another hasn't had the opportunity or the money -- I would think that it depends where the people live as well."

"If the teacher, through unforseen circumstances had to take another job because he needed the money - most people would still say he was middle class, he'd be termed a middle class train driver -- it's not the occupation which determines solely what class you are I don't think ---- it's the newspapers you read, their accent, play rugby or football, bingo or go to Ascot."

Social Class is to do with attitudes to life or the values of the person

Here people in different classes are there because they have different cultural values and different ways of living which essentially means there is a working class culture and a middle class culture and you belong to one or the other by believing in the same kinds of things. Thus, attitude to life is more basic than job, place you live, money etc.

"One important factor which distinguishes working class from middle class particularly is the attitudes - the way they look at life and their attitudes towards other people - if I were asked how to segregate middle class from working class I'd say attitudes rather than money -- I find that working class people are defensive, they think people are against them. And the way you speak also, if you come from a working class family the way you speak alienates you altogether. You can be as friendly as you like but you are never accepted."

"They have different values different outlooks on life they probably have different values, they find different things important, different ways of living, different aspirations. I think the teacher would put a higher emphasis on education for his children than the train driver would, he'd probably have more interest in reading and so on."

"I think class as I understand it is much more to do with your outlook on life than what you earn or where you live. It tends to dictate where you live. You tend to find that people who sort of do jobs like traindrivers you look on as working class. They tend to live perhaps in council houses perhaps have less desire to own their own houses because their culture has told them that they perhaps aren't entitled to it - whereas someone who's a teacher will probably have a culture behind them that says you know 'you've achieved this - now buy your own home'. It's sort of outlook on life more than what you earn and very much inbred passed on from generation to generation. - I think middle class people tend to think that if you work hard the chances are that you get your own house and a car, you get your children to university, you can do this, that and the other. I think that working class people on the other hand tend to think you work hard you go to the pub at night, get a fortnight's holiday a year and that's it. They don't look for any improvement."

Social Class is to do with the value that society places on the job

Here the student either believes that some jobs <u>are</u> more valuable than others and so class depends on the value to society of the job.

Or that society has placed a value on the job which therefore has higher or lower status than other jobs. Either way the class you are in depends on the values society places on the job that you do.

"It's things like the teacher is classed as a professional and the train driver is a manual worker. They can both be similar sorts of people but society doesn't think like that."

"Well the teacher is doing something for society by teaching kids trying to teach kids but you know the train driver hasn't got to think of nothing has he - he just gets into his cab and presses a putton and you're off. But the teacher has to keep up with the times she's got a sort of obligation to society - I think she's more involved."

"History tends to play a part in that the value that you put on the job, that some occupations that were traditionally working class have gained a good income is - hasn't meant that the rest of society changed their status any."

"It's a spin over from the past I think you know because in the past if you were in a profession like teaching that was an accepted thing to be in you know because in those days the upper class the people with the money they had to associate with people who were teachers because they needed them and they had to send their children to Eton and Harrow and what have you, and I think they had to recognise them because if they hadn't there would have been a total disruption of society because if you can't educate your children - future generations then the whole thing will fall apart."

Commentary

There are a number of points we would like to make about these conceptions and they are primarily to do with how adequate these conceptions of social class are.

Firstly, while the conceptions when taken together cover a wide spectrum of things associated with social class, few students had broad conceptions. It was much more common for an individual to describe only one or two sorts of conceptions and no student described them all. In fact, individual's conceptions were generally rather narrow and often given from a subjective even occasionally prejudiced standpoint.

Secondly, all the above conceptions stop at associations. That is, students talk about things they see as associated with class rather than describing the construct of social class. Students did not have a notion that

social class, and how it is divided, is based on any theory of society, and as might be expected from the first interview, no one mentioned Marx and the relationship of people to the means of production. Class was rather seen as a attribute of the person or as a name used by other people or society in general to divide people into groups. So despite the apparent breadth of conceptions we found, there was also extreme limitations to them.

Most students seemed baffled by their own confusion over the term since they recognised it as something they themselves used. This question more than any other we asked seemed to involve the student in first time thinking about why in fact it was that people use the terms working and middle class. Students tended to say that it was a useless or redundant term used by people in the past to explain large differences between people but that in modern society this was no longer necessary and was carried on by 'snobbishness'. Even so these students still attributed social classes of the past to one or two variables such as money or appearances.

Social scientists use the term social class either as an analytic term referring to a theory of social organisation and to do with the relative economic and power positions in that society or else, more operationally, to measure differences in other variables that correlate with social class. In either case social class is seen to be an important way of analysing social stratification. The different social classes are seen to relate to position within one society. Changes in class structure relate to the historical development of society itself.

D101 does not teach directly about social class but there is, in Block 4 on Production and Allocation, a long section on Marx's theory of social change and a section taken from the Communist Manifesto, which talks about the history of class struggles and Block 10 is called Social Science and Social Change. One would hope that after studying D101 students would be more able to talk about social class as being to do with the relative economic and political positions of individuals and groups in society and that their answers would differ significantly from the above conceptions, which not surprisingly, are very much restricted to common sense associations, rather than to any social scientific analysis of social class.

STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS AFTER STUDYING D101

Of the 18 students left in the sample at the end of the course about half had conceptions which fit into the ones discussed earlier and had no further or deeper analysis of class. The conceptions that social class is to do with the job, education, money, background and attitudes were all represented in these later interviews in more or less the same form as in the first interviews. However, there were no conceptions to do with the value of the job to society or the characteristics of the person.

There were however a number of interesting differences compared with the answers the students gave before the course. We will describe each of these and illustrate them with quotes from the transcripts before going on to assess the significance of the differences between the two sets of answers.

There were four new conceptions in the interviews at the end of the course. One of these had been hinted at in the first interviews but had not been picked out by us as an identifiable conception. In these later interviews it was very common.

Class as an historical classification or myth

Here class is thought of as having once been a useful concept which described differences in society but that now these differences were no longer there.

These students seem to be trying to account for why their original ideas about class do not work, i.e. that money or education etc. are not ways of identifying class position. They account for this by saying that class does not exist in real terms anymore.

"I don't know how useful they are really, because it seems to me to apparently present a simple classification which isn't really true to the situation. I mean you tend to assume that someone who is working class is going to have less money to spend than someone who is middle class, but if you take the examples of the teacher and the traindriver, the probability is that the traindriver earns as much money as the teacher - so the division seems rather artitrary really. That's why I

think of it as historical - an historical classification 'cos it probably arose out of something more meaningful in the original situation of working class where probably the actual life style of people was much more different."

"I think it's just something that's been handed down for several generations, there always seems to be this thing that if you're what they call blue collar, which is manual work you're working class but professional people are always deemed to be middle class, it's just the - one of the things with the class system which has been handed down - - everyone that works for a living is working class, I don't really think that it means anything now."

"It's false thinking anyway. The demands on the train-driver has changed tremendously from what it was. It's parallel with that of the teacher nowadays with the new future that has been made by the society - or by the scientists. It affects both the teacher in his attitude to work and his knowledge now of his equipment -- it still exists but it is on a make-believe basis. It exists by people who want to hold on to things."

These students seemed to be saying that, logically, everyone who works should be called working class. The fact that they are not backs up their argument that class is no longer meaningful or significant in present day society.

Some students also thought that class was a sort of myth carried on by people's willingness to put people into categories in order to understand their own relative position. In this latter case, class is something in the imagination of the person doing the classification. The class you assign to someone depends on the class that you think of yourself as belonging to.

"I don't think there is the sort of set thing that you can say - people fit into this then they're working class or middle class. It's just the class system really is more in people's minds and I suppose everyone has vaguely different ideas of how they classify people you know. You might find a train-driver who has a university degree so you know, what class is he in?"

"Well - I suppose you're putting people in categories and most people would say that a train-driver was working class - although I don't know who the most people are that we talk about - Um -- if most people were train-drivers they might not. I mean - class - is also a thing that you think of yourself. I mean I might think of myself as middle class but someone else might think that I'm working class."

"Well most people will understand what the difference between upper, middle and lower class out it depends on what class you are as to how you see those other classes. You'll get clerical people saying well I'm working class because I work, but the chap earns £25,000 a year and drives a Rolls Royce. Someone whose cleaning drains outside saying that he's not working class he's middle or upper class -- it depends very much who's saying it, where they are sitting and who they are."

Here we can see that class is seen as a relative term used to describe those around you. How you classify someone depends on how you perceive the differences between yourself and the other person.

Class as a Measure of Social Mobility

Five students talked about social mobility in their answer without explicitly using the term. Sometimes this was referring back to the previous conception, to explain why class was no longer a useful concept:

"Well I mean - now, the teacher could be the son of a train-driver, and he would still be regarded as slightly different socially. I mean, if they went out together, people would tend to regard the son as different to the father --- You have got to be more articulate if you want to teach, it makes you stand out from other people, you only have to understand signals to drive a train."

Here then, we can see that social mobility is seen as being the result of the differences between people. Other students also used some of the associations made with class in the first interview such as money, background etc. and used them to describe why class is perpetuated and mobility is difficult:

"It has an economic basis - if you are poor, you're working class, and if you are wealthy you're middle class. But if you are born working class you can't get money to get into the middle class."

"I used to think that it was changing - but I recently heard of a medical school where, out of 90 first year students, there were 6 that came from Comprehensive schools and the rest are either public school or independent schools, which I find amazing. I can't believe that all the bright kids go there -- so some professions obviously do keep to a middle class background."

Another student gave quite a sophisticated account of social mobility by making a distinction between a class you were trained into and a class you were born into using the examples of USA and UK to point out the differences:

"In America it is money isn't it - not class. They use money as a yardstick but the UK class, the social grouping - it's the role you take which is still very important. You can't move from one social grouping to another or one class to another very easily, as you can in America. It's the roles they portray really - the one is where you're trained to whereas some class groupings are one's you are born into. You might find that if your father was a railway engineer or whatever, there would be less chance that you'd end up as a teacher. You know, the very nature of a class society is that differences are maintained. Some people do switch but it's not very easy."

This student clearly has a fairly sophisticated understanding of the concept of class which involves the ideas of social stratification and social mobility. His discussion in terms of comparisons shows an analysis rather than a mere listing of associations which characterised most of the students' answers.

One other student seemed to bring in ideas from the course block on Socialization to talk about Social Mobility:

"Someone born into a working class environment has got - well it gives him his socialization, it gives him a set of values and expectations which ensures he's going to stay there."

Social Class as a power position in society

Three students had the idea of power being linked to social class. One student said this explicitly and it formed the basis of her answer to the question:

"It's because of their attitudes and their way of life, not necessarily because of what they earn, in fact not because of what they earn. Because of the amount of power they have within society. I think life-chances come into this doesn't it? I think because of the way they live -- a teacher would have a lot more power to manipulate or influence things in society than a train-driver....."

A further two students incorporated ideas related to power, into their answers. Again the first of these is linked to the former conception of class as historically important:

"It's mythical partly in a sense of power in that originally in those examples you give there would be the labourer and the master. The teacher, traditionally ran his own school until the State took over education. But now the disruption that train-drivers can give has got much more effect, because they can stop people getting to work whereas no one cares much if the teacher goes on strike for a while."

"I think that the class system basically separates - it divides the country into two opposing factions, one's got the money and one's got the ability to produce and they fight each other -- one sees the others' benefit as to his own detriment."

This student has the idea of class conflict and power struggles but seems to be making the relationship from class to opposition rather than the other way round. In his view it is the fact that there is a class system which produces the divisions rather than that the divisions are the essence of the class system. He does however say very clearly where these divisions originate ie. in the ownership of the means of production.

Comment on the interviews after the course

There were many more social scientific terms used in these later interviews but many were mentioned without explanation of how they fitted in with the description of class. Sometimes the terms did enhance the students answer but did not involve a distinct conception of class from those mentioned before. Status was a frequently used term and although it had been referred to by a few students in the earlier interviews there was more understanding of this term demonstrated by a fuller description in the third interview:

"Well there's no one answer really it's to do with parentage, accent, money, housing, status all sorts of things -- it's all tied in, I mean the job you do, status is dictated by the job you do largely so it is to do with the fact that he's teacher rather than a drain-driver because his status is different."

Role was another term that was used by more than one student:

"In the States money is the yardstick and it's not the class but how wealthy you are but in the UK the social grouping, you know it's the role to take is still very important in our society we're still very conscious of the differences between us."

"Well I think it has a lot to do with role as well, how people expect you to be - I mean if you're a certain class if you like, you're expected to act in certain ways and you belong to certain institutions and well - have different life-chances."

Clearly students had some new ideas in the interviews at the end of the course. As well as using more social scientific language the new

conceptions show a growth of understanding. From the associations made in the first interview some students had moved to a more analytic understanding in these later interviews.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' ANSWERS IN THE TWO INTERVIEWS

There is a distinct difference between the first and second set of answers in the words students used to describe social class. However, there was less difference in terms of the actual conceptions of social class. Half the students had conceptions which were more sophisticated and broader than those described in the first interviews. Two students gave particularly good answers in the second interviews. However, half of the students appeared to have been almost unaffected by the course material, as far as can be judged from their answers to the question on social class, although all but two students gained a course credit.

These findings show that for half the students in our sample, the course improved their understanding of social class. For these students the course had enabled them to answer the question about class with more assurance about the consequences and implications of a class structure. What is missing however, is an understanding of the type of construct social class is and what is involved in identifying it in terms of theory. Some social science terminology was used by students and in general they showed understanding of these concepts. However, there was a general lack of analysis in terms of social structure of society and class relationships and no one used (or referred to) a theory of society to explain their understanding of social class.

Why was there so little change in students understanding of social class after the course? One reason may be due to the nature of the teaching about social class in the course material. Nowhere is social class analysed as a concept. The term is used in numerous places throughout the course but, unlike some introductory social science courses, it is not a main focus of attention in any of the course units.

As we have said elsewhere (Taylor, Gibbs and Morgan 1981), changing one's conception of an idea to a more sophisticated understanding can be difficult and takes time. Students do not come to the course with no conception of social class, as shown by the answers in the first interviews. For students to learn more about social class, this

requires them to change and develop their original understanding.

The implications for teaching is that in order to facilitate students' learning about social class, the concept should be the specific focus of discussion. Not only must an expert understanding be made explicit, but it must also be introduced and discussed in the light of less developed understanding that students may hold. Students' existing understandings must be confronted in order that their negotiation towards better understandings is facilitated.

The new social science course (D102) has four weeks work devoted to divisions in society (Block 3: The Production of Social Division) of which social class is one aspect. It seems probable that this approach to teaching will bring about more obvious change in students' understanding of the idea of social class.

Conclusions

This paper has explained a number of different conceptions of social class held by students at the start of the social science foundation course and has shown how these conceptions have changed at the end of the course. In our sample of students, half of them had gained a better understanding of the concept of social class, however, for the other students, the course appeared to have had little influence on their understandings.

We have argued that in order to improve student learning we need to engage the student in active negotiation of their existing knowledge with the knowledge and interpretations presented in the course. This involves two things, firstly, we need to know what students initially understand by the concept of social class in order to confront their understandings and secondly, we have to make the concept of social class a focus of discussion, in order that this negotiation can take place.

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